

Message Text

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TAGS: PFOR, PINT, SY, LE

SUBJECT: LEBANESE DEVELOPMENTS: SHIHABI DISCUSSES
SYRIAN ARMY INTERVENTION

REF: DAMASCUS 1445

1. SUMMARY: SHIHABI SEES NO WAY TO BRING LEBANESE SITUATION UNDER CONTROL OTHER THAN TO INTRODUCE REGULAR SYRIAN FORCES. POSTPONEMENT OF ASAD'S TRIP TO PARIS ANNOUNCED LATE LAST NIGHT UNDERLINES GRAVITY WITH WHICH DAMASCUS REGARDS LEBANESE DEVELOPMENTS. MESSAGE FROM SECRETARY TO ASAD IS RECOMMENDED. END SUMMARY.

2. LATE IN CONVERSATION OF UNRELIEVED GLOOM REPORTED REFTEL, I PRESSED SHIHABI ON POINT THAT SURELY SYRIA COULD FIND WAY OF PASTING TOGETHER A FRACTION OF THE LEBANESE ARMY TO TAKE OVER POSITIONS FROM PLA ALONG SENSITIVE SOUTHERN BORDER. SHIHABI CONTINUED DENY THIS WAS FEASIBLE. HE THEN OBSERVED THAT WHAT COULD SAVE THE SITUATION WOULD BE TO DUPLICATE ARRANGEMENTS EXISTING ON THE GOLAN. I ASKED IF HE WAS REFERRING TO A GOL-ISRAELI AGREEMENT FOR A BUFFER ZONE TOGETHER WITH THINNING OUT OF FORCES AND ARMAMENTS. NO, HE REPLIED, HE MEANT HAVING THE SYRIAN ARMY ENTER AND TAKE UP POSITIONS TO ENSURE LEBANON'S SOUTHERN BORDER REMAINED CALM.

2. I COMMENTED SURELY HE KNEW THIS WOULD NEVER BE
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ACCEPTABLE TO THE ISRAELIS. THEY WOULD INTERPRET THIS

AS A FORCE POISED TO MOVE AGAINST THEM DOWN INTO THE HULA VALLEY AND ALONG THE COAST. PERHAPS NOT, SHIHABI, REPLIED; ISRAELIS MIGHT UNDERSTAND "WITH OR WITHOUT A FORMAL AGREEMENT," IT WAS SIMPLY A PEACEKEEPING FORCE. I COUNTERED THERE WERE OTHER TYPES OF PEACEKEEPING FORCE. ALTHOUGH SYRIA HAD DISMISSED THE IDEA OF ARAB LEAGUE ASSISTANCE SOME WEEKS AGO, PERHAPS THIS SHOULD BE REEXAMINED. WHY NOT A TUNISIAN DETACHMENT FOR EXAMPLE? OR A NON-ARAB FORCE? THE GENERAL REPLIED THAT IT SIMPLY WOULD NOT WORK.

3. I SAID TO CONTEMPLATE SENDING IN SYRIAN REGULARS WAS AS PROVOCATIVE AS IT HAD BEEN FOR KHADDAM IN JANUARY TO TALK OF "ANNEXING" LEBANON SHOULD LEBANESE CONTINUE TO PRESS FOR PARTITION OF THEIR COUNTRY. TO THIS THE GENERAL RETORTED, "WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE IDEA OF ANNEXATION? THE LEBANESE CANNOT MANAGE THEIR OWN AFFAIRS AND THEY ARE FAST BECOMING A THREAT TO AREA STABILITY." PARTITION, HE CONTINUED, IS VIRTUALLY ACCOMPLISHED TODAY, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE LEBANESE LEADERSHIP CONTINUED VERBALLY TO OPPOSE IT. HE SAID USG MIGHT THINK MATTERS WERE REMEDIABLE IN LEBANON AND THAT A NEW TEAM COULD MANAGE. (I HAD MENTIONED INDICATIONS OF A GENERATION SPLIT WITH REPORTS THAT EVEN CHAMOUN'S AND JEMAYYEL'S SONS WERE FAVORING THE AHDAB MOVEMENT.) SUCH PEOPLE WERE, HE SAID, MERELY "AMERICAN INSTRUMENTS." THIS I SHARPLY CONTRADICTED REMINDING HIM THAT WE HAD EXPLICITLY DISASSOCIATED OURSELVES FROM CHRISTIAN EXTREMISTS IN DISCUSSIONS WITH BOTH THE SYRIANS AND THE LEBANESE OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS. AT THIS POINT SHIHABI MADE FIRST OF SEVERAL REPEATED SWEEPING MOVEMENTS OF HIS RIGHT ARM INDICATING THAT THE ONLY SOLUTION FOR LEBANON WAS TO GET RID OF THE WHOLE LEADERSHIP.

4. AFTER BRIEF DISCUSSION OF CURRENT ISRAELI POLITICS, INCLUDING IMPLICATIONS OF RETURN OF GOLDA MEIR, AND PROGRESS IN OUR ELECTION PRIMARIES, I BROUGHT US BACK TO QUESTION OF SYRIAN FORCES. SAID I WANTED TO BE ABSOLUTELY SURE I UNDERSTOOD HIM. I WAS NOT SPEAKING ON INSTRUCTIONS BUT FROM EVERYTHING I KNEW OF ISRAELI ATTITUDES, THIS WOULD BE A RECIPE FOR WAR. WAS HE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERING INTRODUCING SYRIAN TROOPS? SHIHABI REPLIED HE WAS NOT "PROPOSING" THIS NOR WAS HE SUGGESTING

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THAT I REPORT HIS THINKING TO WASHINGTON. BUT AS ONE SURVEYED THE LEBANESE SCENE, WHAT ALTERNATIVE WAS THERE? I REPEATED THERE WERE STILL THE VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF THE LEBANESE POLITICAL STRUCTURE: THE PRESIDENCY, THE PARLIAMENT AND, YES, EVEN THE ARMY. EVEN IF HE WERE RIGHT IN HIS ANALYSIS OF LEBANESE INCAPACITY, IT WAS ESSENTIAL TO CRNTINUE TO WORK WITH THESE INSTRUMENTS. IF IT WERE NO MORE THAN A "GAME OF MIRRORS," EVEN SUCH A GAME HAD ITS USES IN GAINING

TIME. (TO THIS, SHIHABI MADE ANOTHER SWEEPING GESTURE WIPING THEM ALL OFF THE BOARD.)

5. COMMENT: EVEN BY THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION SHIHABI DID NOT REVEAL THAT THE DECISION HAD BEEN TAKEN, AS IT MUST HAVE BEEN BY THEN, FOR ASAD TO POSTPONE HIS OFFICIAL VISIT TO PARIS SCHEDULED TO BEGIN MARCH 15. (HE WAS CALLED OUT OF HIS OFFICE WHERE WE WERE MEETING THREE TIMES TO TAKE URGENT PHONE CALLS APPARENTLY FROM THE PRESIDENCY.) THE POSTPONEMENT WAS JOINTLY ANNOUNCED IN PARIS AND DAMASCUS LATER IN THE EVENING. TO POSTPONE THIS TRIP ON WHICH ASAD HAS SO OBVIOUSLY BEEN COUNTING AS A BOOST TO SYRIAN PRESTIGE AND A FURTHER OPENING TO THE WEST UNDERLINES THE GRAVITY WITH WHICH THE REGIME REGARDS WHAT SHIHABI KEPT CALLING THE CURRENT "DRIFT OF AFFAIRS IN LEBANON."

6. IT SHOULD BE EMPHASIZED THAT I WAS TALKING TO AN EXHAUSTED AND THOROUGHLY FED UP CHIEF OF STAFF WHO MAY NOT HAVE BEEN CONSIDERING FULLY WHAT HE WAS SAYING. BUT I FEAR IN HIS CURRENT STATE OF FRUSTRATION, SHIHABI MAY FOR THE FIRST TIME BE ADDING HIS VOICE TO THOSE COUNSELING ASAD TO CONSIDER USE OF SYRIAN TROOPS TO RESTORE ORDER IN LEBANON AND THEREBY PROTECT HIS OWN HEAVY POLITICAL INVESTMENT IN THE SITUATION. ASAD, AS WE KNOW HIM, IS NOT A MAN TO BE STAMPEDED INTO SO GRAVE A DECISION. IT WOULD, NONETHELESS, I BELIEVE, HELP HIM TO RESIST THIS TEMPTATION IF SECRETARY, WITHOUT REFERENCE TO MY CONVERSATION WITH SHIHABI, WERE TO ENCOURAGE ASAD TO CONTINUE MODERATE AND RESPONSIBLE COURSE WHICH SYRIA HAS SO FAR FOLLOWED IN LEBANON AND WHICH IN OUR VIEW CONTINUES TO HOLD BEST CHANCE FOR GRADUAL RESTORATION OF LEBANESE ABILITY TO RUN THEIR OWN AFFAIRS. SIMILAR MESSAGE FROM HUSSEIN MIGHT ALSO BE HELPFUL. IT IS PROBABLY TOO MUCH TO HOPE THAT EGYPTIANS COULD BE PERSUADED NOT TO RUB ASAD'S NOSE IN HIS "FAILURE"

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BUT WE SHOULD CONSIDER WHETHER THERE IS ANYTHING WHICH MIGHT BE DONE IN CAIRO WHERE, I UNDERSTAND, SADAT WILL BE MAKING A MAJOR SPEECH MARCH 15. WHILE UNLIKE SHIHABI WITH WHOM I HAVE BEEN ABLE SPEAK VERY FRANKLY AND CALMLY, ASAD WOULD PROBABLY TAKE OFFENSE AT ANY HINT OR THREAT OF A POSSIBLE ISRAELI REACTION (AS HE DID IN NOVEMBER 1974), THIS POINT WOULD BE IMPLICIT IN ANY MESSAGE COUNSELING CONTINUED SYRIAN MODERATION.

7. DATT IS CHECKING OUT PRINCIPAL MILITARY SITES TO NORTH AND SOUTH OF DAMASCUS FOR ANY INDICATION THAT SARG MAY BE ORGANIZING ITSELF FOR A MILITARY MOVE.
MURPHY

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